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Proceedings of the 6th International Congress
of the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East

Volume 2

Excavations, Surveys and Restorations:
Reports on Recent Field Archaeology in the Near East



Harrassowitz Verlag

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Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek
Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen
Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet
über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Bibliographic information published by the Deutsche Nationalbibliothek
The Deutsche Nationalbibliothek lists this publication in the Deutsche
Nationalbibliografie; detailed bibliographic data are available in the internet
at <http://dnb.d-nb.de>.

For further information about our publishing program consult our
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Printed on permanent/durable paper.

Printing and binding: Memminger MedienCentrum AG

Printed in Germany

ISBN 978-3-447-06216-9

Proceedings
of the 6th International Congress
on the Archaeology
of the Ancient Near East
May, 5th-10th 2008, “Sapienza” - Università di Roma

Volume 2
Excavations, Surveys and Restorations:
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2010
Harrassowitz Verlag · Wiesbaden

AN IRON AGE FORTRESS IN CENTRAL IRAN: ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATIONS IN SHAMSHIRGAH, QOM, 2005. PRELIMINARY REPORT

HAMID FAHIMI

ABSTRACT

Shamshirgah is located 20 km South of Qom and on the road Qom-Kahak. This site was reported for the first time by Kleiss (Kleiss 1983) under the name of Khowrabad, but since the first archaeological activities season under its local name "Shamshirgah". Shamshirgah is located between two rock ridges, lining the southern edge of the Dasht-e Kavir. Unfortunately some part of the architectural remains in this important Iron Age site in the central Iranian plateau was destroyed by illegal digging and also other activities. After visiting the site in 2003, I started an archaeological project in Shamshirgah (Fahimi 2003). In 2005 we began with topographical mapping, systematic survey and also excavation of a trench (CX57) in the center of site, North of natural gate of Shamshirgah. According to this excavations, the architectural remains and archaeological finds in this part of the site dated to Iron Age II (1200-800 B.C). The most important architectural remain from this period is a mudbrick wall, with a floor and stone wall. The size of the mudbricks is 36x36x10 cm. These mudbricks can be compared with mudbricks found from the Platform and other buildings of Sialk VI in Sialk South mound (Ghirshman 1939: Pl. XXXIII-XXXIV; Fahimi 2006: 110). In the excavated trench a stone wall 80 cm large, forming the outer wall of one corner of a building, was documented, that was covered, especially in the northern part, by debris and wall collapse. Three rooms inside the building were constrained within the limits of the trench (Azarnoush and Helwing 2005: 226). Shamshirgah was a great fortress with two big stone walls to the east and west and two long natural walls (rock ridge). The pottery associated with the building in trench CX57 is grey ware dating from Iron Age II. Shamshirgah is an important Iron Age II site in the centre of the Iranian plateau for the study of the architecture of this period and of the relations between Iron Age II sites in the North (north of Alborz Mountain and also of Tehran plain), northeast of Iran (Gorgan plain) and in South part of Iranian plateau (Kashan plain and Esfahan).

INTRODUCTION

According to archaeological knowledge until about 20 years ago, the Iron Age culture of the Central Iranian Plateau was known only from few graveyards, for example in Qeitariye, Khorvin and Tepe Sialk. But over the last 20 years, many archaeological sites have become known and were subsequently excavated by Iranian teams.

Noteworthy are especially some Iron Age settlements, sometimes also cemeteries, in Tape Mamourin, southwest of Tehran;¹ Pishva in Varamin;² Tape Ozbaki east of Tehran;³ Tape Sarm southwest of Qom;⁴ Tape Pardis in the Tehran plain;⁵ Vasun and Zarbolagh north of Qom;⁶ Qoli Darvish southwest of Qom;⁷ resumed excavations in the South Mound of Tappe Sialk;⁸ and the fortress Shamshirgah south of Qom,⁹ which is the subject of this article (Fig. 1).

Before these new archaeological activities began, it was thought that the Iron Age culture of the Central Iranian Plateau extended southwards as far as Tappe Sialk, but not further. Only few scholars believed that this culture, and in fact, this people, extended southwards beyond Tappe Sialk, respectively beyond the southern edge of the central desert of Iran. Combined evidence from scientific research during the last two decades and from chance finds, respectively illegal excavations, has proven that this theory is no longer valid. The chance discoveries of the site Gortān¹⁰ inside the city of Esfahān, and of the site Milajerd¹¹ first reported by the Arisman¹² survey team, both found accidentally during construction works, and the subsequent confiscation of objects from the Milajerd cemetery by the Natanz Police all indicate that the Iron Age culture on the Iranian Plateau reached much further south than previously expected. This also indicates that most probably either the larger part of relevant sites have elapsed the attention of archaeologists so far, or those sites that have been found were not reported in a way that allows the scientific utilization of these observations.

GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION AND CHARACTERISTIC

Shamshirgah is located 20 km southeast of Qom, on the road from Qom to Kahak. The site was reported for the first time by Wolfram Kleiss under the name of Khowrabad (Fig. 2). Since the local people refer to the place under the name Shamshirgah, this local name was used since the first season. Kleiss published an article where he showed several types of Iron Age potteries that he found on the surface of the site. He did not excavate, but according to observations on architectural remains on the surface, he believed that Shamshirgah was divided into two parts: A fortress and a settlement. He compared the fortress of Shamshirgah with similar structures in other parts of Iran and

1 Mehrkiyan 1996.

2 Tehrani Moghadam 1997.

3 Majidzadeh 2000; 2003.

4 Pourbakhshandeh *unpubl.*; Sarlak 2004.

5 Fazeli *et al.* 2007.

6 Malekzadeh 2003; 2004.

7 Sarlak, Aqhili 2005.

8 Fahimi 2003; 2004b; 2006; Helwing 2006.

9 Kleiss 1983; Fahimi *unpubl. a*; *unpubl. b*.

10 Javeri 2004.

11 Fahimi *in press*.

12 Chegini, Helwing *forthc.*

in Babylon in Mesopotamia.¹³

The geological and topographical setting of Shamshirgah is exceptional. The site is located between two rock ridges (Limestone) (Fig. 3), lining the southern edge of the Dasht-e Kavir, at an elevation of about 1050 m above sea level. Therefore, these two natural ridges provide a natural fortification that could protect installations and settlement areas inside. From atop the limestone ridges, a wide view over the edge of the Dasht-e Kavir is given; at the same time, the site controls access to the area of Kahak, where Iron Age mining activities are documented in Veshnavah. In close vicinity, 700 m to the south, lies the Iron Age cemetery of Sarm, that could indeed have been the graveyard related to the settlement at Shamshirgah.

After visiting the site in 2003,¹⁴ an archaeological project began with topographical mapping, systematic survey and also excavation of a trench (CX57) in the centre of the site, north of the natural gate of Shamshirgah.¹⁵

Unfortunately, the architectural remains in the site were partly destroyed by illegal digging and agricultural soil retrieving (Fig. 4).

As is visible on the topographical map, Shamshirgah extends about 25 hectares (Fig. 5), which includes the dispersion of archaeological artefacts in the southwest of the site. According to architectural remains visible on the surface, the length of the main structures that most probably comprise the castle is about 900 meters; the width of these architectural remains between the rock ridges is about 180 to 200 m.

SYSTEMATIC SURVEY

Before beginning to excavate, a systematic survey was carried out in the area around the future test trench. This area comprised about 2000 mq.¹⁶ We collected all pottery sherds, stone artefacts and other finds. During this short survey, some painted bricks and one piece of slag were found.

TRENCH CX57

On the basis of the topographical mapping and the surveying results, it was decided to dig a trench in the center of the site, north of the natural gate in the southern rock ridge (Fig. 6). This part of the site had the visible architecture that was preserved better than in other parts, and it could also be an important part of the installations, because it was located so close to the entrance of the fortress (Fig. 7). The trench in square CX57 was laid out as 10 x 10 m trench, but it was decided to excavate only one half of the square.¹⁷ The deepest point that excavation reached was 80 cm below the surface in

13 Kleiss 1983.

14 Fahimi 2004 a.

15 Unfortunately the project had so short time and also few budget.

16 The squares of surveyed area in topographical map are: CT59, CT58, CT57, CT56, CU60, CU58, CU59, CU57, CU56, CV60, CV59, CV58, CV57, CV56, CW60, CW58, CW59, CW57, CW56.

17 The excavation area was 9 x 5 m except 1 x 10 m balk.

the north-eastern part of the trench.

Two different building structures can be distinguished. One is in the northern half of the trench and consists of two rooms with stone walls and some other stone installations by the side of stone wall 114 (Fig. 8). The other part is located in the southern part of the trench and consists of an extensive mud-brick surface. Probably this is a mud-brick floor of one large room. The floor is related to an oven with a circular stone-revetment, F. 113 (Fig. 9). Inside this oven was a fill of ash, charcoal and few animal bones. On the west side of the mud-brick surface was a heap of stones. It seems that there was an entrance.

STRATIGRAPHY

Two building phases could be distinguished on the basis of stratigraphic observations (Fig. 10). The older building phase 2 consists of the mud-brick walls and floor and the associated oven in the corner of one room. The size of the mud-bricks is about 36 x 36 x 10 cm. According to the size and method of production, these mud-bricks can be compared with mud-bricks used in the platform and in other Iron Age buildings or structures on the South Mound of Tappe Sialk.¹⁸

The later building phase 1 comprises the two rooms with stone wall and gypsum floor that are found in the northeast of the trench. One stone wall was 80 cm wide and formed the outer wall of one corner of a building that was covered, especially in the northern part, by debris and wall collapse. Three rooms inside the building were constrained within the limits of the trench.¹⁹ In the southwest corner of room 121 a large pithos was found that contained an iron sickle. Most pottery was collected the debris and collapse feature F. 105.

It seems that the architectural remains of phase 1 were parts of the fortress architecture located just next to the entrance to the north of the gate; phase 2 instead refers to a settlement phase before the construction of the fortress. This does not mean that these two phases date to two separate periods, but they seem to be not very distant in time and both belong to the Iron Age II. This date is confirmed by the ceramic assemblages from the separate contexts.

POTTERY

The pottery found in CX57 can be divided into three groups on the basis of colour and surface characteristics: Gray ware, red ware and buff ware. The first group can be further subdivided into two varieties, light and dark grey ware.

The potteries altogether can be distinguished into four ware groups on the basis of colour and clay:

Dark grey ware (10YR4/1) with sandy clay and mica, well fired. The slip on the

18 Ghirshman 1939: Pls XXXIII-XXXIV; Fahimi 2006: 110.

19 Azarnoush, Helwing 2005: 226.

inner surface derives from wet smoothing, the outside is polished, and some are at least burnished. Most vessels are wheel-thrown.

Light grey ware (GLEY1.6/10Y) with black grit and lime stone temper, badly fired and rather soft. Most bear a slip inside and outside, most are wheel-made.

Red ware (matrix 10R4/6, surface 10R6/4) with sandy clay and red and black grit, limestone and mica temper, badly fired and rather soft. Most are hand made. Most bear a buff slip (7.5YR8/2) inside and outside.

Buff ware with coarse black and red grit temper and lime stone, well fired. Handmade, inside and outside wet-smoothed.

About 75 percent of the ceramic are of the grey ware group; out of these, most are of the light grey variety. Grey ceramic is one of the main characteristics of the Iron Age II, but it is also important to know during the course of Iron Age II, light grey ware increases and dark grey ware decreases clearly. This pattern has been observed on several Iron Age sites on the central Iranian plateau.

In Shamshirgah, there is indeed a difference in the composition of phase 1 and phase 2 assemblages: although we have no quantification available yet, it can be stated that during the older phase 2 the amount of light grey ware was smaller than in the later phase 1.

Regarding the forms, there are some typical Iron Age pottery forms represented in the Shamshirgah assemblage (Fig. 11): for example, the bowl with horizontal handle; spouted jars or vessel with open spout that is connected to the rim (Fig. 11.4); simple bowls with straight rim; simple bowls with straight rim and handle; strainer vessels (Fig. 11.6) and also simple small cups.

STAMP- IMPRESSED BRICK

Before the first archaeological project in Shamshirgah, one other survey team in the Kahak region collected 63 stamp-impressed brick fragments from the surface of the Shamshirgah fortress area²⁰. Therefore, during the systematic survey of the first archaeological project, a heap of simple brick fragments without any decoration was found on the site that had been left behind by the other team. These undecorated bricks had been considered not interesting by the first survey team. Subsequently, we found only very few brick fragments on the surface of our survey area (Fig. 12).

All bricks from Shamshirgah are gray. On the basis of shape and decoration, these bricks are comparable to the material from the 'grande construction'²¹ in Tappe Sialk. However, according to color and surface slip they are similar to the Iron Age bricks from Qoli Darvish.²² The bricks found around the "grande construction" on the South Mound of Sialk are buff and date to the late Iron Age (III). The bricks from Shamshirgah and Qoli Darvish are gray and date to the Middle Iron Age (II).

²⁰ Malekzadeh 2005.

²¹ Ghirshman 1939: Pl. XCIX.

²² Azarnoush, Helwing 2005: 225, F.55.

This comparison between Sialk and Shamshirgah and Qoli Darvish is also possible for potteries. In fact, most of the potteries from Shamshirgah are light gray ware with typical forms of Iron Age II. Therefore, according to pottery and bricks, the fortress of Shamshirgah should be dated to the Iron Age II period, around 800-600 BC.

METAL OBJECT

The metal objects from Shamshirgah from trench CX57 are very few and small fragments of bronze, but on the last day of the excavation, one iron sickle (Fig. 13) was found inside a pithos (Fig. 14) in room 121. This sickle is comparable with sickles found in cemeteries A and B in Tappe Sialk, and with material from the Milajerd graveyard.

CONCLUSION

Shamshirgah was a large fortress constructed between two long natural walls (rock ridges), and closed to the open east and west end with two big stone walls. Mapping, survey and excavation at Shamshirgah revealed the existence of the architectural remains and archaeological finds from Iron Age II (1200-800 BC). The pottery associated with the building in trench CX57 is grey ware dating, according to comparisons, to Iron Age II. The most important architectural remains from this period are a stone wall with a gypsum plaster floor in phase 1, and a mud-brick floor and an oven in the older phase 2. Both building phases are not very distant in time and can both be assigned to Iron Age II. Although the extensions of the excavated area during the first season were limited, it could be proven that this part of the fortress was an important part of the building. This building could be a monumental building inside the architectural compound like the monumental platform on the South Mound of Tappe Sialk. This hypothesis is based on the existence of thick stone walls and of impressed bricks as architectural decoration.

The discovery and archaeological investigation at Shamshirgah has proven the existence of a large fortress, constructed at a strategically important location and within a naturally fortified rock enclosure. Such locations are so far much underrepresented in the archaeological record. Until most recently, our knowledge on the Iranian Iron Age was indeed based almost entirely on cemetery data, with only a few additional settlement sites known. The new evidence from Shamshirgah allows now to add a completely new type of archaeological site to the known corpus: beyond cemeteries and settlements, fortified places indicate for the first time the need for refuge and protection, indicating that times were possibly not entirely peaceful. Iron Age fortresses are known, in different settings, from several locations within the Zagros Mountains - the Mannean fortress Ziwiye, or Sorkhdom-e Lori and Sorkhdom-e Laki in Lorestan can be named as some examples. Further research into the Iron Age on the Central Iranian plateau will, no doubt, yield further surprises and will add to a better

understanding of the complex developments of Iron Age Iran.

If the model holds true that the origin of these tribes who moved southwards during the second half of the second and the first half of the 1st millennium BC is indeed the eastern and western littoral of the Caspian Sea, it can be expected that the Iron Age sites of the Central Iranian Plateau, and especially in the south of the Plateau, date later than Iron Age sites in the North, for example in the Gorgan Plain in east, or around Lake Orumiye in west. Most Iron Age settlements and cemeteries known on the Central Iranian Plateau date to the first centuries of the 1st mill. BC. During the time when in the sites of the north-eastern and north-western regions a continuous occupation from the Iron Age I to III is visible. But the sites of the Central Iranian Plateau and especially of the southern part of the Plateau do not begin in Iron Age I but later. This pattern that underlines a movement of the Iron Age culture onto the Iranian Plateau from the north is already evident from the chronology of the site even on the Plateau. Archaeological excavations in Tappe Qoli Darviš and the Sarm cemetery have yielded valuable results, and the excavations at Zar Bolagh and the survey work in Kahak, have made Iron Age research on the Iranian Plateau more important. Resumed field work on the South Mound of Tappe Sialk also, and an analysis of the excavations by R. Ghirhsman in cemeteries A and B at Sialk, revealed not only architecture of the Sialk V and VI period, but also the relation of this architecture with those people who were buried in the two graveyards.

The archaeological knowledge that we possess about the Iron Age culture in the northern, north-eastern, north-western and western part of Iran on the basis of fieldwork during the last hundred years is immense. However, the boundaries of this culture remain ill defined. A second problem concerns the chronology of the Iron Age on the Iranian Plateau: before new data from recently excavated sites such as mentioned in the beginning of my presentation, became available, the chronology of the Iron Age on the Central Iranian Plateau relied entirely on observations obtained from excavations in cemeteries.

The newly available data derive mostly from sites dating to the later part of the Iron Age I, II and III. The distribution of the Iron Age pottery on the Iranian Plateau, in terms of space and time, allows for a diachronic analysis of the extension of this culture and will thus illustrate the movement of the Iranian tribes into the southern parts of the Iranian highlands.

In order to understand the chronological position of the Shamshirgah, a discussion of the chronology of the Iron Age I-III in Iran is necessary. So far, there are many divergent opinions concerning the Iron Age chronology. It can be stated, on the basis of the work by R. Dyson, T. Cuyler Young and L. van den Berghe,²³ that the beginning of the Iron Age falls around the middle of the 2nd millennium BC. However, although these scholars agree that the beginning of the Iron Age falls around the middle of the 2nd millennium BC, there are divergent opinions concerning the details of the beginning of the period and which material culture is associated with it. There are

23 van den Berghe 1964.

also different opinions concerning the origin of the Iranian Iron Age and the homeland of the Iranian tribes, as well as the directions of their movements. The classification of Iron Age pottery proposed by Cuyler Young²⁴ is so far the most useful one for the study of the Iron Age in Iran. On the basis of the stratigraphy from Hasanlu, one of the key sites for the understanding of the Iron Age chronology in Iran (Hasanlu V: Iron Age I, 1450-1200 BC; Hasanlu IV: Iron Age II, 1200-800 BC; Hasanlu III: Iron Age III, 800-550 BC).

Nevertheless some materials from Shamshirgah are in context, but this is a general problem on the Central Plateau of Iran that many excavated sites still do not provide a secure chronology. For example, the graveyards Sialk A and B were dated by R. Ghirshman to Iron Age I and II.²⁵ However, Ghirshman himself discussed the possibility to date the Sialk A cemetery to the Late Bronze Age. Cuyler Young believes, with regard to the Sialk B cemetery, that this cemetery must be assigned to the Iron Age II. Dyson is convinced that Sialk cemetery B dates to Iron Age III. The site Tappe Sialk with its huge mud-brick platform is certainly one of the most important Iron Age sites on the Central Plateau and one of the key sites for the Iron Age chronology in the area. It will therefore also serve as the major reference point for the study of the Milajerd assemblage. There is, however, indeed the problem that the chronological position of this very key site is still not sufficiently known. The Iron Age of Sialk, more precisely Sialk VI, and especially the beginning of that period is linked by Ghirshman, through comparisons with material excavated by the Russian Expedition to the North of the Atrak River, in the Southeast of the Caspian Sea, where pottery comparable to Sialk VI material was found, that the culture of the Iranian Iron Age III arrived on the Central Plateau via the Northeast of Iran. If this was true, these Iranian tribes would have come to Sialk via the Gorgan Plain and the Alborz mountains and then would have passed along modern Teheran to arrive at Sialk. In my opinion, and on the basis of the new excavations, the Sialk VI culture, as it was found in Sialk proper, and especially the material typical for cemetery B, with its red-on-buff ware, and in association with S-carinated rim bowls, must belong to the very end of the Iron Age. S-carinated rim bowls do not occur before 700-600 BC. Of course, in Ghirshman's report on the cemetery B excavations, and on the excavations in the South Mound, there is no mention of S-carinated rim bowls, but they are attested in the new excavations. If the opinion is correct that Sialk VI can be assigned to the Iron Age III, and at the same time no gap between Sialk V and VI existed, and with we consider the similarity of the shapes of the Sialk V red and buff ware with the shapes of the Sialk VI pottery, and if we also consider the similarity of the grey ware from Sialk V and Sialk VI, and if we consider that there seems to be no gap between the architectural layers of Sialk V and Sialk VI on the South Mound, we can conclude that Sialk V is contemporary with the beginning of Iron Age II, at the very end of the 2nd millennium BC.

24 Cuyler Young 1985: 361-378.

25 Ghirshman 1939: 22.

New research, and the comparisons with north-western and north-eastern Iran provides much new information and sheds new light on the origin and migration of the Iranian tribes. One problem is the distance of about 100 km between Shamshirgah and Sialk, where no archaeological survey has so far been carried out. It seems however, that the region is rich in archaeological remains. Sites have occasionally been found during geological surveys or accidentally during construction work.

But, material found in Shamshirgah, especially in the case of potteries, is also comparable to some material in northwest of Iran, for example. We hope to be able to obtain radio carbon dates for the sampled materials.

I would like to thanks my dear colleagues during the first season in Shamshirgah (Fig. 15) and advisor professor of the project Dr Barbara Helwing from DAI in Berlin and also zooarchaeologist Dr Marjan Mashkour from CNRS in Paris, who greatly helped to the project.

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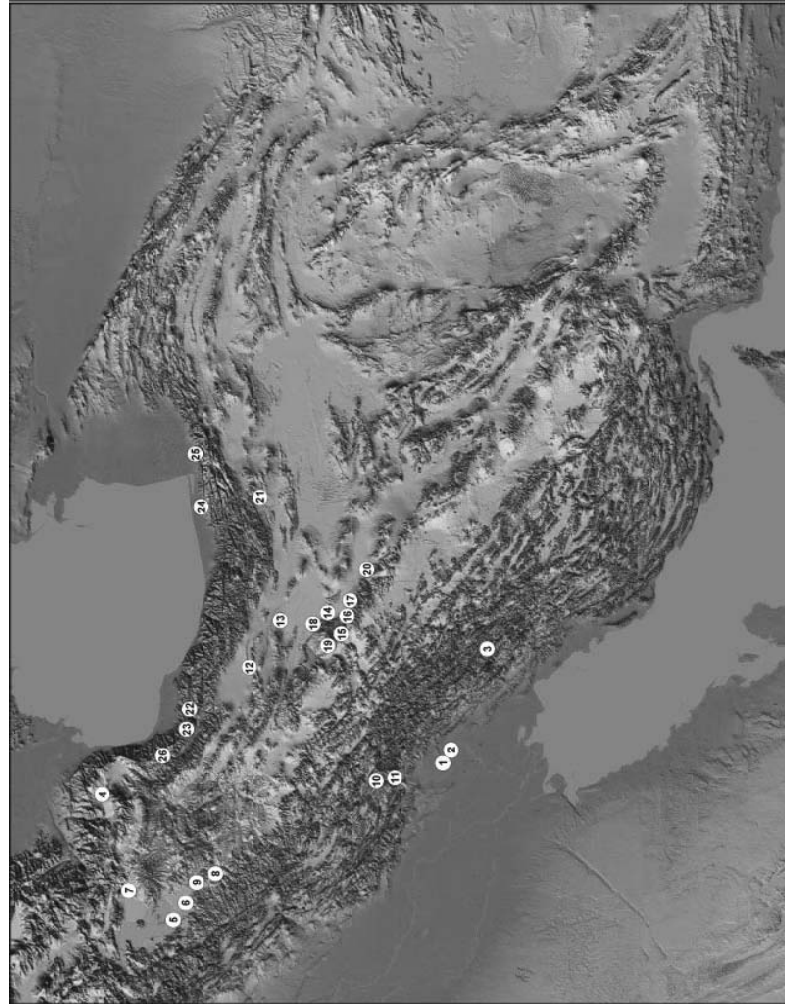


Fig.1: Late Bronze Age and Iron Age sites in Iran and location of Shamshirgah.

Source: Azarnoush, Helwing 2005: 216, Map. 4.

1. Haft Tappe
2. Chogha Zanbil
3. Qal' e Geli Tappe
4. Sahryeri-Meskinsahr
5. Hasanlu
6. Bukan (Tappe Qa layci)
7. Tabriz - Masjed-e Kabud
8. Qal' e Ziwiye
9. Kul Ta rike
10. Tappe Sangtarasa
11. Sorkhdom-e Laki
12. Tappe Ozbaki
13. Tappe Ma' morin
14. Tappe Qoli Darvish
15. Veshnave
16. Sarm
17. Shamshirgah
18. Zar Bolag
19. Vasun-e Kahak
20. Tappe Sialk
21. Gandab-e Karand
22. Jamsidabad
23. West Sefidrud
24. Gohar Tappe
25. Bazgir
26. Talesh graveyards, Tul

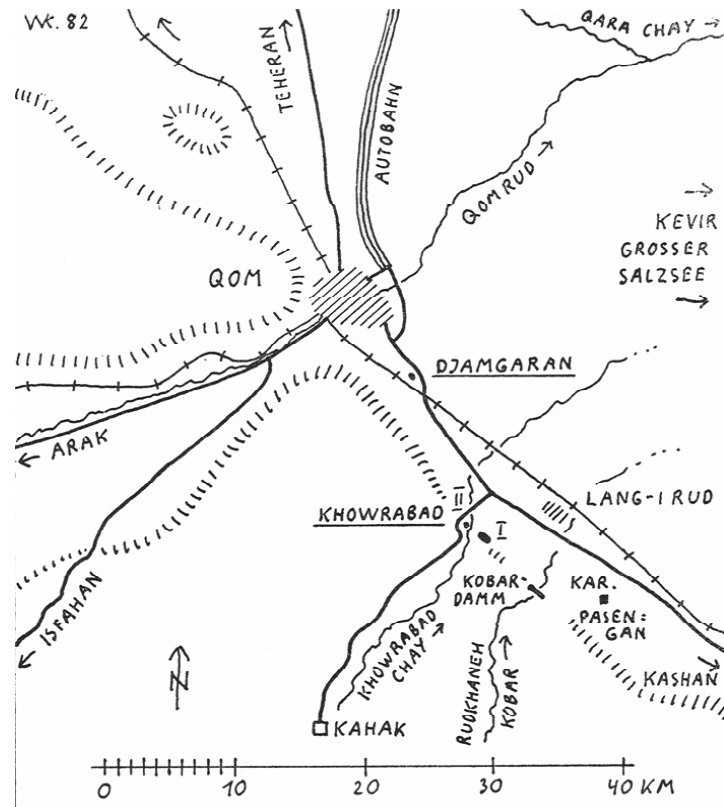


Fig. 2: Location of Shamshirgah in map of Kleiss under the name of Khowrabad.

Source: Kleiss 1983: 70.

Fig. 3: The geological and topographical setting of Shamshirgah between two rock ridges (Limestone).





Fig. 4: Illegal digging and agricultural soil retrieving.

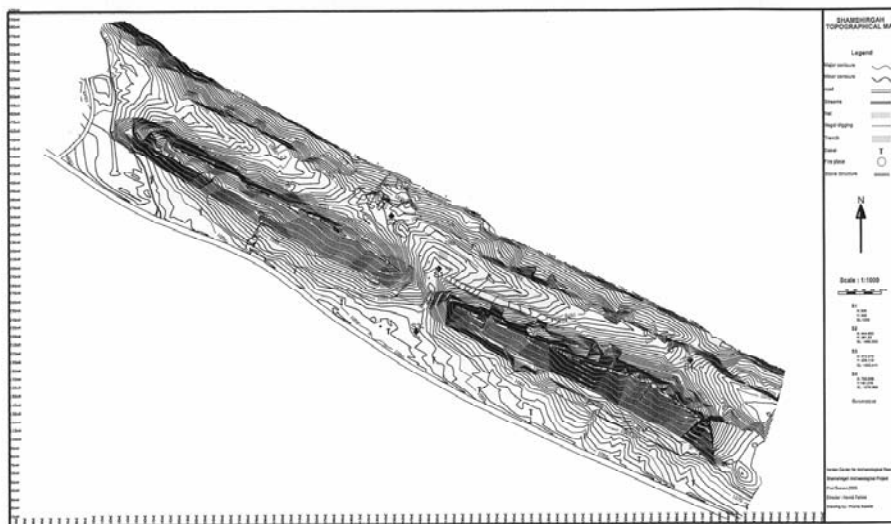


Fig. 5: The topographical map of Shamshirgah.



Fig. 6: Natural gate of Shamsirgah fortress.

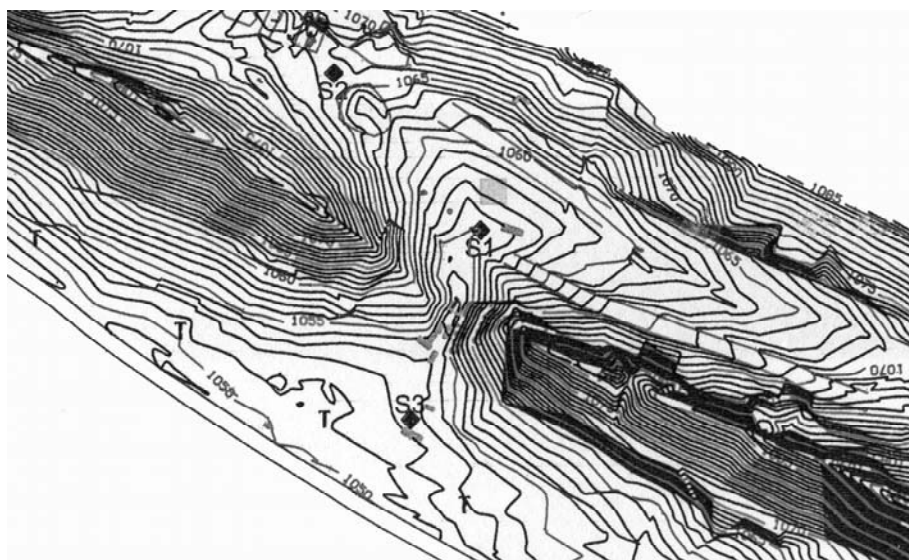


Fig. 7: Location of CX57 in north part of natural entrance.



Fig. 8: Feature 114 (stone wall).



Fig. 9: Feature 113 (Oven).



Fig. 10: Some features of CX57 in two phases.

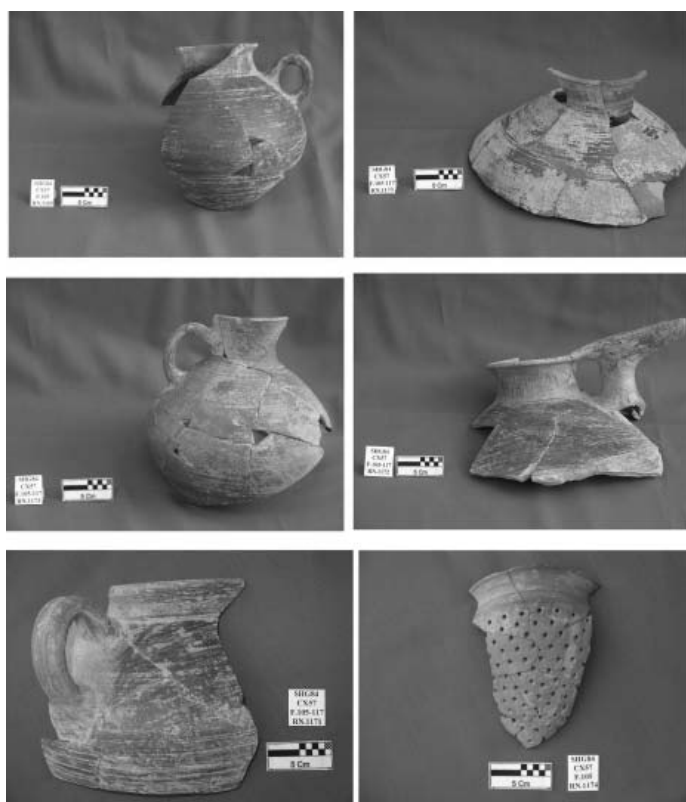


Fig. 11: Some typical Iron Age II pottery vessels found in CX57.



Fig. 12: Stamp-impressed brick.



Fig. 13: Iron Sickle found inside a pithos in room 121.



Fig. 14: Pithos found on the floor of room 121.



Fig. 15: Members of the first archaeological project in Shamshirgah. Left to right: M.Reza Izadi Motlagh, S.A.Mousavi, Puria Saïidi, Hamid Fahimi, Vali Jahani, Ammar Kawousi, Mohammad Karami, Aytakin Habibi, Azam. Dehghan.